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ABSTRACT

A survey was taken in seven participating school-to-work regions in Ohio to find out what students, teachers, parents, and employers thought about sex equity issues. Participants included 6,173 9th-12th grade students (3,316 girls and 2,857 boys), 760 teachers, 743 parents, and 230 employers. Findings included the following: (1) up to 69 percent of students responding to the survey have experienced some form of sexual harassment (mostly student-to-student); (2) students had differed about whether they had participated in a class on sexual harassment, if they could explain the school harassment policy, and if they knew whom they would talk with if they had a complaint; (3) 84 percent of parents said they knew whom to talk with if they had a complaint; (4) teachers reported being aware of sexual harassment policies and complaint procedures; (5) only 45 percent of students reported that they would feel comfortable in reporting sexual harassment to school authorities, although 83 percent of parents said they would; (6) 20 percent of students were unsure and 37 percent said that nothing would happen to the harasser if they reported sexual harassment to a school authority, although a much higher percentage of parents and teachers thought sexual harassers would be dealt with appropriately. The study recommended that school authorities take reports of sexual harassment seriously and act responsibly, develop a sexual harassment policy for school districts, and communicate the policy to all staff, students, and parents; and create an atmosphere of trust and respect among students and staff. (KC)

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Equity Exchange
Ohio Vocational Sex Equity

ED 430 158

Volume 5 Issue 4
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Ohio Students, Parents, and Teachers Speak Out on Sexual Harassment

"I feel very uncomfortable when Mr.____ comes up behind me and 'massages' my shoulders."
—from a 12th grade survey respondent

This past year, the Ohio Department of Education, Vocational Sex Equity offered School-to-Work regions an opportunity to find out what students, teachers, parents, and employers thought about equity issues.

Vocational Sex Equity has compiled the survey results from the seven participating School-to-Work regions to grasp the breadth and depth of equity issues throughout the state. Of the 6,173 9th through 12th grade students who completed surveys, 3,316 were girls and 2,857 were boys. In addition, 760 teachers, 743 parents, and 230 employers completed surveys.

There are several limitations to the survey. Regions were allowed to modify the survey according to their local needs. If a region wanted to remove a section of the survey (such as sexual harassment), Vocational Sex Equity gave them the flexibility to do so. If questions needed to be modified to suit the local culture, the regions had that option. The respondents were not selected according to a state-wide scientific random sample. Each region determined when and to whom they would conduct the survey. Some regions may have surveyed students in a particular class while other regions may have done a random sampling of a particular grade. Information such as the response rate and conditions under which the survey was conducted (including dates, places, and proctoring of the survey) was not available to Vocational Sex Equity. Responses may not add up to 100 percent, depending on how the regions conducted the survey.

Despite these limitations, the survey results present a snapshot of what Ohio high school students, parents, and teachers think about equity issues. From how they have responded, we know there are still equity issues to be addressed in our schools, families, and communities.

Educators need to be aware of sexual harassment issues in their schools. This paper presents results from the questions students, parents, and teachers answered about sexual harassment. Recent research and recommendations are also given. These survey results and recommendations can help educators understand what students, parents, and teachers perceive about sexual harassment so they can more effectively address sexual harassment issues.

Survey Results and Current Research

Up to 69 percent of students responding to the survey have experienced some form of sexual harassment in Ohio schools. (See Table 1.) The results of this survey and numerous national studies indicate that sexual harassment is a serious problem for students and schools. In a survey commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), four in five (81%) 8th through 11th grade public school students have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their school lives. Of these, 85 percent were girls and 76 percent were boys. Thirty-two percent of students reporting sexual harassment had experienced harassment before seventh grade. Most harassment is student-to-student with nearly four in five (79%) students harassing peers (Harris et al., 1993).

To conduct the survey in your district, contact Connie Blair, Vocational Gender Equity Supervisor, Division of Vocational and Adult Education, Department of Education, 65 S. Front St., Columbus, OH 43215-4183. Phone: 614-644-6238

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Table 1. Percentage of students positively responding to the question: Have you ever had the following events happen to you in school, that you found offensive?	
39%	Students brushing up against you in a sexual way
48%	Suggestive looks or leering
30%	People touching you sexually when you did not want them to
69%	Name calling
34%	Fondling
37%	Sexual threats
35%	Other behavior of a sexual nature that you found offensive

Although the Ohio survey results did not indicate the extent to which the harassment occurred by gender, national studies show that males and females experience different types of harassment. Girls of all races experience more sexual harassment than boys. In an unscientific survey of *Seventeen* readers, 89 percent of the girls reported they received unwanted looks and gestures. Eighty-three percent reported unwanted pinching, grabbing, or other touching (Lawton, 1993). In addition, students' reactions to the harassment vary by gender. In the AAUW survey previously mentioned, boys indicate that homophobic harassment is the most bothersome for them; girls indicate that verbal and physical sexual harassment is the most bothersome for them (Harris et al., 1993).

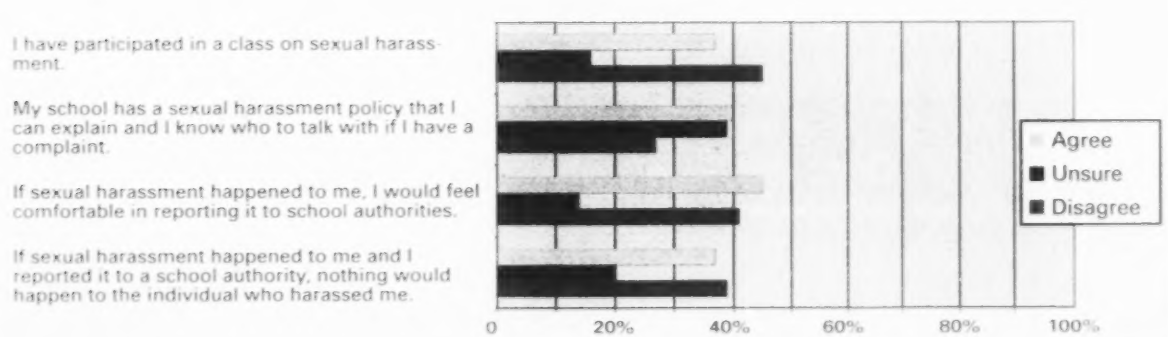
Sexual harassment often impacts academic performance. It creates situations where students do not want to go to school or talk as much in class. Students may find it hard to pay attention in school and may earn lower grades. They stay home from school or cut class, as school becomes an unsafe place for them. It is impossible to have a safe and equitable learning environment when sexual harassment exists.

Students had mixed reactions regarding whether they had participated in a class on sexual harassment, if they could explain the school harassment policy, and if they knew whom they would talk with if they had a complaint. (See Table 2.) Parents seemed to be unsure or not know if their children had participated in a class on sexual harassment or if the school had a policy they could explain. Eighty-four percent of parents said they knew whom to talk with if they had complaints. (See Table 3.) Teachers reported being aware of sexual harassment policies and complaint procedures. (See Table 4.) In 1995, the Ohio State School Board recommended that all districts address the issue of sexual harassment at the local district level. The Board developed a suggested policy for school districts to adapt and use that included provisions for complaints and investigations. An increasing number of school districts are developing policies. Teachers may know about their district's policy and complaint procedures but the policy may or may not be communicated to the students and appears to not be communicated to the parents. All parties need to be informed about the policy and complaint procedures.

In addition, students should be receiving instruction on identifying and preventing sexual harassment in classroom and workplace environments. Sexual harassment issues are included in the Occupational Competency Analysis Profiles (OCAPs) for Employability Skills. These issues are also included in the "Working Responsibly" strand of the Core Integrated Technical and Academic Competencies (ITACs).

Only 45 percent of students reported that they would feel comfortable in reporting sexual harassment to school authorities. (See Table 2.) In contrast, eighty-three percent of parents said they would feel comfortable in reporting it to school authorities. (See Table 3.) According to the AAUW survey, only seven percent of students who have been harassed say they have told a teacher, while 23 percent say they told a family member and another 23 percent say

Table 2. Students' Responses Regarding Sexual Harassment


I have participated in a class on sexual harassment.
My school has a sexual harassment policy that I can explain and I know who to talk with if I have a complaint.
If sexual harassment happened to me, I would feel comfortable in reporting it to school authorities.
If sexual harassment happened to me and I reported it to a school authority, nothing would happen to the individual who harassed me.
Agree
Unsure
Disagree
0
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

Results from an Ohio survey of 6,173 students in grades 9-12 in 7 School-to-Work regions.

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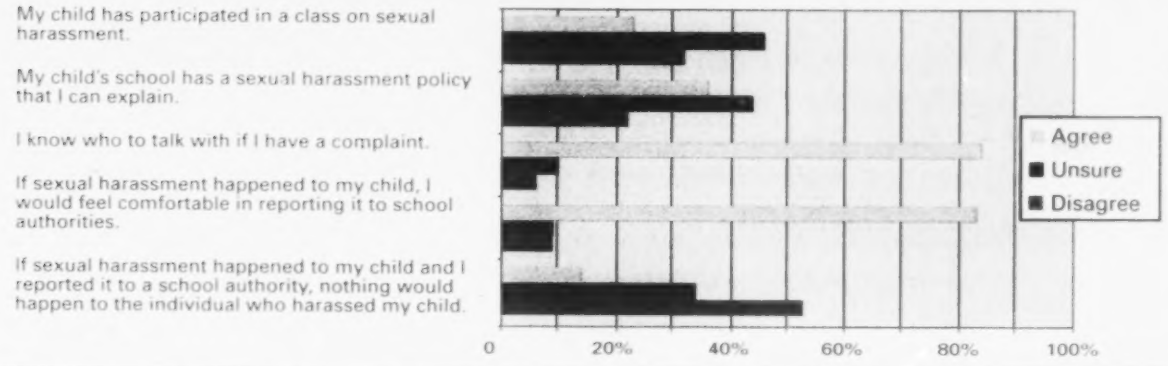
Table 3. Parents' Responses Regarding Sexual Harassment


My child has participated in a class on sexual harassment.
My child's school has a sexual harassment policy that I can explain.
I know who to talk with if I have a complaint.
If sexual harassment happened to my child, I would feel comfortable in reporting it to school authorities.
If sexual harassment happened to my child and I reported it to a school authority, nothing would happen to the individual who harassed my child.
Agree
Unsure
Disagree
0
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

Results from an Ohio survey of 743 parents of students in grades 9-12 in 7 School-to-Work regions.

they told no one (Harris et al., 1993). For whatever reasons, students are uncomfortable talking with parents or teachers about sexual harassment happening to them. Often they will talk with peers instead. An atmosphere of trust and an understanding of appropriate intervention and communication channels must be in place in order to stop sexual harassment.

> *"I was called a slut. . . I think that's wrong. . . and she (name caller) wrote 'slut' on my locker. . . I told the principal about her again and again, but nothing has ever been done. . . I think this would be offensive to anyone."*
>
> *—from an 9th grade survey respondent*

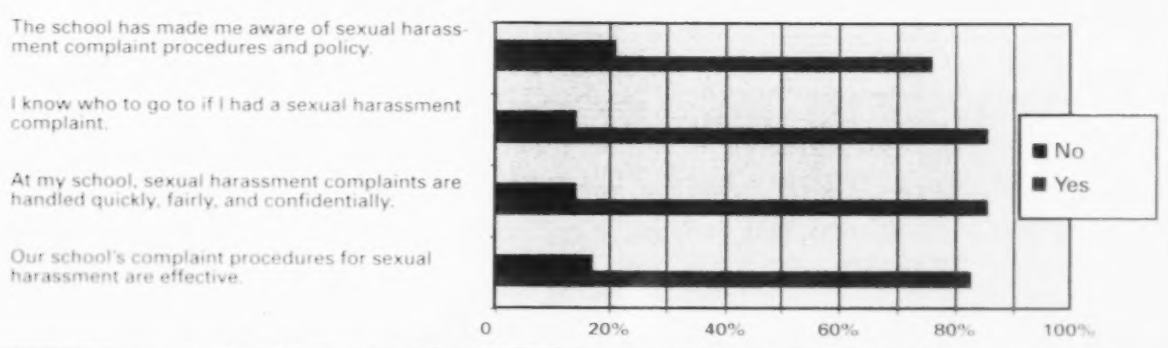
Twenty percent of students were unsure and 37% of students agreed that nothing would happen to the individual who harassed them if sexual harassment had happened to them and they reported it to a school authority. However, the majority of parents (53%) believed something would happen to the individual who harassed their child. Eighty-six percent of teachers thought sexual harassment complaints were handled quickly, fairly, and confidentially.

In addition, 83% of teachers said their school's complaint procedures for sexual harassment were effective. For some reason, students do not believe that their harassers would be held accountable for their actions. In an unscientific survey of *Seventeen* readers, respondents indicated that when a teacher or administrator knew about an incident, nothing happened to the accused harasser in 45 percent of the cases (Lawton, 1993). Once again, communication and trust need to be addressed between students, parents, teachers, and school authorities.

Recommendations

The costs of sexual harassment are high—for the student and for the school, in emotional trauma, academic performance, and legal costs. Sexual harassment is illegal according to Title IX of the Education Amendments of

Table 4. Teachers' Responses Regarding Sexual Harassment


The school has made me aware of sexual harassment complaint procedures and policy.
I know who to go to if I had a sexual harassment complaint.
At my school, sexual harassment complaints are handled quickly, fairly, and confidentially.
Our school's complaint procedures for sexual harassment are effective.
No
Yes
0
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

Results from an Ohio survey of 760 teachers of students in grades 9-12 in 7 School-to-Work regions.

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1972 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is the school district's and, subsequently, each educator's responsibility to create a safe and equitable learning environment. Educators need to

- Take reports of sexual harassment seriously and act responsibly upon them.
- Develop a sexual harassment policy for the school district.
- Communicate the policy and complaint procedures to all staff, students, and parents. Include the policy in all handbooks, giving equal space compared to other policies to ensure sufficient emphasis. Communicate the policy during student and parent orientations, and through role plays, school newsletters, and posters.
- Educate students and staff on sexual harassment issues in school and the workplace, including its characteristics, ways to prevent it, and strategies to deal with it.
- Create an atmosphere of trust and respect among students and staff.

References

Harris, Louis, and Associates. (1993). *Hostile hallways: The AAUW survey on sexual harassment in America's schools.* Annapolis Junction, MD: AAUW Educational Foundation.

Lawton, M. (1993, March 31). Survey paints 'picture' of school sexual harassment. *Education week.*

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